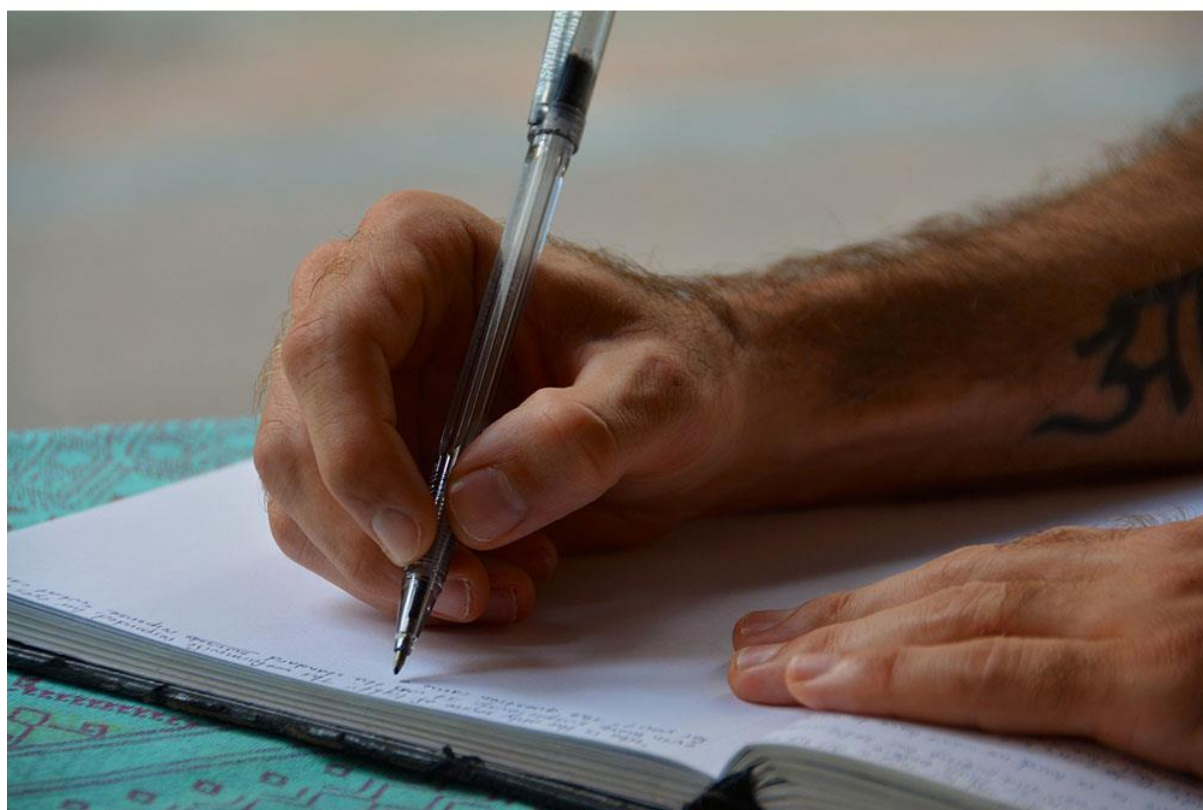


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Fiction Transcending History: The Hero Becoming a Myth in *Operation? BashaiTudu*

Abstract

Operation? Bashai Tudu is one of the distinguished works of Mahasweta Devi who is also widely known as *Sabar Janani*. Mahasweta dedicates her whole span of life to serve the most depressed and the most neglected tribal communities and write about their wretchedness to expose to the world how the hungry people are mercilessly exploited by the Jotedars and the Money-lenders in the agrarian society and how the establishments remain utterly indifferent to it. Government's laws about the minimum wages of the agricultural labourers are not implemented. Although the text has at its immediate background the Naxalite Movement of the 1970 – 1977, but Bashai believes in his own ideals. Bashai dies in confrontation with police and army, but is reborn again and again to lead the next resistance against injustice. The revolutionaries die, but revolution continues through succeeding generations.

Key Words: Tribal, Exploited, Jotedar, Establishment, Resistance

The fundamental rights in life are food, water, cloth, shelter, education and medical facilities. We are highly shocked to find that after so many years of our independence a large

number of Indians are perennially deprived of such primary necessities. Even in the 21st century, innumerable Indians remain incapable of securing two meals daily. Many farmers commit suicide because of the burden of loan either from the bank or from a money lender. Mahasweta Devi writes for the Dalit in society. She delineates the harsh reality of the downtrodden and the marginalised through most of her writings. She says in an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that:

... there is no education for them, no health facilities, no roads, no way of generating income. Nothing is done for them although so much money is allotted for them. They do not want money; they want facilities; they want to live the life of an honourable poor Indian, you might say. But they are denied everything. The tribals of India are denied everything (Imaginary Maps, iii).

She writes what she experiences from her long living with such unsung lots. People who walk through Mahasweta Devi's writings are Mundas, Sobors, Oraons, Santals, Lodhas, Kherias, Dhobis, Keots, Mahalis, Dusads and such like. From Mahasweta Devi's *Agnigarbha* (The womb of Fire), 1978, and *Chotti Munda o Tar Teer* (Chotti Munda and his Arrow) 1980, the rural India appears for the first time in its realistic manner. What is exceptional in her writing is that when other writers depict the subaltern as dejected, yielding, and controllable, She gives voice of protest to her characters who tower over the wretchedness with a spirit of resistance. In an interview with Spivak, Mahasweta says, 'I have seen with my own eyes.....The criminalization of politics, letting the lumpen loose in the lower- caste and tribal belts. Inhuman torture and oppression. I have also seen resistance.....What *Chotti Munda* or my other stories and books depict is a continuing struggle' (Chotti Munda and his Arrow, ix).

In *Operation? Bashai Tudu* Mahasweta Devi is absolutely concerned with the unspeakable plight of the agricultural labourers in the agrarian society by the all devouring Jotedars and money-lenders. To fight against such extreme forms of injustices Naxalite movement was organized in 1967 and almost all the parts of West Bengal stirred in revolt. Such insurrection inspired the tortured and the exploited peasantry in the neighbouring states of Andhra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand, and Madhyapradesh. All the factors that contributed to the eruption of wrath in the peasantry remained unchanged and unattended. The Naxalite Movement was crushed by brutal repression. The Tebhaga Movement in 1946-47 and 1948-1950 did remain confined to the rights of the sharecroppers. Influenced by the Tebhaga Movement the peasantry in the Kakdwip and Sundarbans struggled for State intervention. The experience of Tebhaga Movement supplied fuel behind the Naxalite Movement. During Tebhaga Movement in 1946-1947 twelve advasi peasants got killed in the North Bengal belt as per Government Record. Estate Acquisition Act was passed in 1954, legalizing a 25-acre limit on an individual's hold. The revised act on the ceiling of landholding was passed in 1971. Ironically, both the acts remained ineffective. In the forward to *Tragic Tales From Jangalmahal*, Hon'ble Justice Asok Kumar Ganguly pens in the context of two tribals' death, 'The compilation discloses the trauma of unfortunate tribals in an unjust society despite the fact that our Constitution and most of the laws ensure the concept of social justice. In reality the poor tribals are 'priced out' of the system and justice for them is a teasing illusion.'

Many novels were written in the context of Naxalite Movement, *Grame Cholo* by Swarnakamal Mitra, 1972; *Mahakaler Rather Ghora* by Samaresh Basu, 1977; *Kalbela* by Samaresh Majumdar, 1982; *Shyaola* by Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, 1977 etc, but Mahasweta's *Mother of 1084* and *Operation? Bashai Tudu* go beyond the gross dimension of social reality. Mahasweta says that her novella *Operation? Bashai Tudu*, 1978, has nothing to do with

politics. She writes for the dispossessed and the disinherited. Her heart bleeds for them. She writes in the Preface to the novella : ‘ I do not believe that any politics confined to promoting a party’s interests can replace the present social system. Forty-one years after independence I see my countrymen without food, water and land, and reeling under debts and bonded labour. An anger, luminous and burning like the sun, directed against a system that cannot free my people from these inhuman constraints is the only source of inspiration for all my writing’(xxv-xxvi). Many people who were humiliated and heckled fought courageously against the societal indifference and the Government apathy. As a result they were rewarded with death by the administrative machineries. So, out of several valiant tribal heroes Mahasweta Devi develops her own hero, Bashai Tudu, who has his own ideals. The translator of this novella, Samik Bandyopadhyay, writes in the Introduction, ‘ Once she conceives Bashai Tudu , she lets him grow into a myth, who dies at every encounter and is reborn to lead the next one. Even as the magic of the myth runs through the narrative and lends it coherence and unity, one has only to read between the lines to discern the revolutionary project that keeps the myth alive as a strategy by making it obligatory for every successor to Bashai’s image to take the place of the dead man’(xiv).

The very first sentence of Operation? Bashai Tudu, ‘ The news broke upon the police station all on a sudden, like a hunk of meat dropped among a pack of crows by a kite, sparking off hectic activity’(P. 1) is indicating the macabre that is going to dominate the novella. The words and phrases ‘police’, ‘sudden’, ‘hunk of meat’, ‘pack of crows’ and ‘kite’ make us awe-struck and frightened. This opening is as significant and suggestive as the opening of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1.i). In *Macbeth* the appearance of three witches at the background of thunder, lightning and rain and their responses to their favourites give us foreknowledge about the atmosphere of the play. Bashai is first introduced by Mato Dome who heard from his father that Bashai Tudu was dying in the forest of Charsha, and he

brought the news to the police administration. During 1970-1977 the porters, lawyers, traders, shopkeepers, the cycle-rickshaw pullers and many others were appointed as informers of the police administration. Deoki Missir, the clerk, told the Sub Inspector that he should go to see to verify the news.

For Kali Santra, the second important character in the text, Bashai was an experience. Many years ago they were in the peasant's movement together. 'Then they had drifted apart from each other on ideological and tactical grounds' (P. 5). Kali did not know that under the instruction from the Calcutta Headquarter the four SIs had put him in the jeep and drawn him to the spot to identify Bashai's corpse all over the four times that the Santal Bashai died between 1970 and 1976.

From police station Mato went to Kali and told him about Bashai's death in the Charsha Forest. Charsha was a notorious and deserted place to the administration because the revolutionary Bashai lived there. Paddy seeds were denied to the aggrieved. During drought and famine, government assistance was refused. It was completely left condemned and deprived. Ironically, this neglected Charsha got top priority at the news of Bashai's death. When at the Headquarter the news was delivered over the telephone – 'Bashai Tudu. Dying at Charsha' (P. 9), order came instantly 'Go to the site. Enforcement following' (P.9). The order was accompanied by-'Kali Santra' (P. 9).

Kali Santra was not in his Jilla Barta Office. When a constable informed the SI that he did not meet Kali, the SI screamed in anger, 'Samanta-Babu will skin you alive' (P. 9). Deoki Missir was extremely happy at the news and told the SI that 'I'm going home. My duty hours are over' (P. 10). The SI was in critical position having no record of Bashai's identity, and so could not decide how to identify Bashai. Bashai's most uncommon habit was '...in moments of frenzy or when he was most upset, Bashai Tudu would make a strange motion with his hands that seemed to suggest someone trying to wring the neck of the wind'(P. 11). The SI

was trembling in fear and contemplating ‘ How could he be killed four times , identified four times, cremated four times on the administration’s money, and come alive four times? (p.13)

Kali secretly reached Mushai Tudu’s house to meet Bashai Tudu and saw that everyone of the house addressed him as ‘comrade’ (P. 23). After a lunch with khesari daal and rice they were taking rest under a tree and Kali asked, ‘Bashai, are you leaving the party? (P. 24) Bashai then clarified his stand why he was maintaining distance from the Party. Bashai’s real disappointment with the Party dawned on him when he came to realize that the Party would not do anything for the grief-torn agricultural labourers and sharecroppers. Bashai had been at so many conferences, meetings and proceedings of the Kisan Shabha which was supposed to look after the interests of the peasantry, did not fulfil the expected goal. Instead, it upheld the interests of the Jotedars and money-lenders. Bashai’s realization of the party politics was striking and illuminating, ‘ ...when we found the Kisan Shabha disowning the agricultural labourers like a mother abandoning an illegitimate child, when the Kisan Shabha refused to raise a little finger for the cause of the agricultural labourers, then we had to start thinking for ourselves’(P. 26). The agony did not end here. Bashai like other Santals had to endure humiliation and mental trauma on the basis of caste. He told Kali that the old and new generations of Party babus were all alike, ‘But do the party babus of the new generation treat the Santals, the Kaoras and the Tiors as their own people, eh? At Samanta Babu’s house, didn’t I see you and your class served tea in chinaware cups, and an earthen cup for me?’ (P. 27) He told Kali that he believed the babus were a caste by themselves as the Bagdis are a caste, the Kaoras are a caste. Bashai’s words were unpleasant, but undeniable. He continued that most of the Party members as they came from the upper strata of the society hated Bashai because he was a Santal. He was believed to be one of the Santals who went about almost naked, and lived on mice and snakes during famine. The next statement made by Bashai was razor-sharp and realistic,

Kali-babu , a brahman or a kayastha would never be an agricultural labourer.

If there had been a few of them, upper caste agricultural labourers, then the agricultural labourers too would have split apart into castes. I thank my stars that I am one of those naked, starving bastards who have taken all the kicks and cried in pain and haven't yet broken apart into castes, and can still eat from the same pot of rice. (P. 28).

Kali's perception of the upper class was bitter and full of hatred. Like a true communist, he asked Kali whether he could give people a country where there would be no distinctions between Santal Comrades, Kaora Comrades, and other Comrades coming from the upper caste.

Bashai was extremely and widely popular in this part of Bengal and his area of operation was vast. It was quite natural because the MLAs and MPs did never visit such villages. It was Bashai alone who was available during droughts, floods, the epidemics of cholera, in the fight against the Jotedars and money-lenders, and in every crisis. Bashai was bothered about nothing except the Minimum Wages for the agricultural labourers. Kisan Sabha was established in 1936, and since then no attempt was made by the leaders to soothe the pains of the agricultural labourers. The Party split in 1964, even after that the Party did not consider the agricultural labourers as cultivators. Bashai's understanding of Party designs through his rich experiences made him despondent. Bashai realized that as the middle peasantry had the power to control vote, so the Kisan Sabha, despite knowing that 'The small peasants were the life blood of the Kisan Sabha' (33), did not act as per their interests. Bashai's comment was chilling, 'So, you see, Bashai is no fool. He feeds on rice, not grass' (P. 33). Bashai saw throughout his life that the leaders of the Party were selected from the upper classes of the people, and , therefore, they would look after the rich and middle peasantry. Bashai was once offered the post of the District Secretary of the Khetmazdoor

Union, but reading the concealed intention of the Party he refused to accept it: 'Why did you have to have Bashai Tudu as the district secretary of that Union? Because, that would give our Party a hold on it. There was none to back it up, it was a shaky set-up, so it was for Bashai to hold it for the Party' (40). During the conversation that night, 'With his two hands Bashai seemed to wring the neck of the void before him, his black, muscular, stubby fingers turning and twisting in the process, which he repeated again and again' (P. 48).

Bashai's faith in Party had torn to pieces. Bashai's war was against the Jotedars, money-lenders and the establishments. The Jotedars and the money-lenders were the same person. They pompously lived on the interests earned from the money borrowed by the poor and hungry peasants. But they could be given a fight had there been an organized Kisan Shabha or a communist peasant Front. In order to achieve the lawful right Bashai could go to any length. If the law would be broken by the powerful ones he had to do something stronger, 'Where the law serves, we'd go for the law. Where the Jotedar defies the law, we'd step beyond the law' (P. 53). Bashai's strategy was a guerrilla one. His area of operation was very wide. So, the administration could not easily trace his whereabouts. His every action area was at least forty to fifty miles away from the nearest action area. Thus, he could force the administration in a fix. Bashai knew that 'MW' for the agricultural labourers was passed for the first time in 1953. It was revised in 1959. Then it was revised in 1968. In 1970 no rate approved by the Government was paid by the land owners. In 1974 'MW' was revised twice but was not in practice in 1976. Bashai told Kali, 'Do you know the number of agricultural labourers in our State? More than three million seven hundred thousand. They are denied the minimum wages that the Government had made mandatory for them, and the Communist Kisan Sabha is not concerned about it'(54). So, the oppressed lot, using Bashai as a symbol for them, chose to embark on action to snatch their right away. The fight that was started has been continuing, 'Present continuous' (P.55).

Bashai's first place of action was at Banari in 1970. Pratap Goldar was the most powerful person of this village, Banari which was mostly inhabited by the Santals. All of them were agricultural labourers and so remained exploited by Pratap. He had only sixteen hundred and sixty-six acres of land defying the land-ceiling law of the Government. He was the only money-lender to twenty-five villages. Madhab Tudu and Gopi Majhi had heard of 'MW' from Biru Pathak. They decided to ask Pratap during sowing paddy in May to give them 'MW' as laid down by the Government. During the 1970s few Jotedars and money-lenders were being mercilessly killed. The peasantry desperately wanted Bashai in their confrontation with notorious Pratap. Laban Majhi asked,

“ ‘ Do we have the strength to rise against Pratap? Do we have Bashai Tudu with us?’

‘Bashai's with the United Front’.

‘Bashai's left the Front’.

‘Eh? Become a Naxal then?’

‘He'll fight for the agricultural labourers’.

‘ Where's he now?’ (P. 78)

Immediately Madhab and Gopi left Banari for Paltakudi. There they met Bashai and intimated him everything about Pratap Goldar. Bashai then asked them promise, ‘Once the battle's launched, there's no turning back. We'll finish Pratap off if that's what's required’ (P. 79). Returning to the village Madhab and Gopi raised the issue of 'MW', but Pratap mildly threatened them.

One afternoon Pratap was informed that the agricultural labourers stopped sowing the field and were sitting idle on the bank of the river, Charsha. Pratap hurried to the place, but found everything normal. Surprisingly, from the gathered labourers one Santal, clad in a sparkling white dhoti, asked Pratap angrily, ‘The sowing will be over today. When do they get their wages? They haven't got anything in all these six days. Are you sure you're going to

pay? Then why did you go to the bank yesterday to put all your cash in?' (P. 89). Bashai threatened after a pause, 'It was the wrong thing to do, Pratap-babu. You'll have your paddy all right. But you won't be there to taste the rice from the paddy' (P. 89). After murdering Pratap and his farmhand, the dead bodies were carried four miles to the north of Banari and thrown them in a ditch. The police were waiting on the bank and seeing Bashai and Bhomra shouted to stop and then started firing, 'The shots came one after another. Shot after shot. Scrambling in the water. Swimming under water. Then swimming close to the other bank, getting out of the water and running into the woods, crouching all the way. When the day broke, a dead buffalo and a man floated on the river. More shots. And the man's face smashed beyond recognition. The police ran along the bank' (P. 92).

As Bashai, when he was alive, did not have a passport or did not raid a bank, so the police had no definite record of him. After death he came to have a well-maintained identity. He was five feet and seven inches, had a cut mark on the forehead. A police man told Kali that when he shot, the man raised his hands and was wringing the neck of the wind. It fully resembled with Bashai's mannerism and the dead body was identified as Bashai's. With the passing of time, life resumed its normal course. After fourteen or fifteen days of this operation, the half-yearly Dharmaraja Fair started at Jagula and when all the people were in festive mood some Sodan from Paltakudi came to Kali Santra and told him to take 'Toramy chinkapchul' (95) for Bashai who was living in Dishai. Kali quickly left the office with Sodan. After a long silence the administration was violently shaken off by the news that Bashai Tudu was in action again.

It was about November, 1972, when the Operation Jagula happened. It was not exactly at Jagula, it was six miles from Jagula, the village of Kankdasole. Rameshwar Bhuinya, the most powerful Jotedar at Jagula and in its vicinity, had five thousand acres of illegal land in many false names. Like his father, Rameshwar used to hate and capitalize on

the lower castes. In 1972, there was Congress regime and Jagula which was so close to Kankdasole was unmoved by the high tide of Naxalite Movement. Rameshwar would force the sharecroppers remain bound to him permanently in debt. He had his private goons and twenty of them were illegally armed.

Things went on very smoothly. But one day, an information agitated the whole police administration completely. Deoki asked the SI, 'Leave at once. This Bashai is vicious. Shoots spears and arrows with the same ease. Be on your guard. If you kill him, you'll be the DSP for sure, and I'll give you ma salaam' (P.106). On reaching the spot of action the SI found that Rameshwar remaining surrounded by Santals was 'facing a santal, squat, middle-aged, strongly built' (P. 106). They were armed with their ancient weapons—'bows and arrows, sickles, hatchets, pole axes, short spears, throwing spears, multiheaded fishkilling spears, long spears' (P.106).

'What's the matter?' asked the SI.

'They want the MW. They must have it', said the Santal.

'Who are you?'

.....Bashai Tudu is my name' (P. 107).

Bashai in no ambiguous terms told the SI that the labourers must be given the Government sanctioned 'MW'. Otherwise there would be no harvesting. Bashai assured the SI and Rameshwar that there would be no trouble if labourers were given the approved rate. Bashai asked the gathered people :

'What do you say, my people?'

'Your word is final, Bashai.'

'I won't, said Rameshwar.

'You will. Otherwise you'd be a dead man' (P. 107).

Succumbing to his inherited nature Rameshwar declined to meet the just demand of the labourers. He hoped that the police would do something for him. When SI asked him say something about the legal demand of the labourers, Rameshwar was reluctant to compromise. Bashai roared, 'There are things you start doing some day, Rameshwar-babu. Do you ever die before you die the first time? You have never paid it, you'll pay it the first time now. Have you ever seen your paddy burning? You'll see it burning the first time' (P. 108). When Rameshwar again refused to pay the rightful claim 'Bashai's spear pierced his larynx'(P. 109). Bashai had received a bayonet in his stomach. The DSP, Rameshwar and Bashai were sent to the hospital and the concerned doctors under the special order of the higher authority tried their level best to save Bashai's life. Kali Santra was brought to the hospital to identify Bashai. Kali called, 'Bashai! Bashai! Bashai! (P. 111) Bashai slowly opened his eyes and looked at each other. 'A tremor ran through Bashai's hands. The hands rose for a minute. They wrung the neck of the air' (P. 111). At the huge expense of the Government, only two hundred and fifty one people were brought to identify Bashai's dead body. Their confirmation left the administration with great relief.

Next operation took place at Bakuli, 1973. Surja Sau was the Jotedar at the village of Bakuli owning five hundred acres of land violating the land ceiling act. Once it was a very disturbed area because Bashai Tudu had spent there a long time as an active activist of the Front. In the pre-independence day Bashai had a base there and the village gained popularity as a notorious place from the administration. Surja Sau had grabbed huge amount of money sanctioned as relief for the needy in natural calamity and thus, increased his volume of property. On BDO's request he denied to use canal water for cultivating the land because in that case his money-lending business would suffer a huge loss. The sharecroppers organized a deputation against Surja Sau and the sympathetic BDO apprised them of his conversation

with Surja Sau. One evening, after some days of the deputation, the sharecroppers dared go straight to Surja Sau:

‘What’s this? What do you want?’

‘Draw water from the canal.’

‘I won’t.’

‘Draw the water, everything’s burning up.’

‘Why should I draw it?’

‘What will we feed on?’

‘That’s not my concern’ (P. 124)

When Draupadi Mejhen asked him why he would not take water from canal, Surja Sau replied,

‘I won’t draw water to increase the yield.’

‘You’ll give loans and fatten on the interest?’

‘Get out from here’ (P. 124).

Then a Santal came forward and introduced him as Bashai Tudu. Surja Sau did not believe because he knew Bashai was alive no more. But he was forced to believe. He was brought on the canal bank and forcibly thrown on the ground. The first blow came from Bashai and it was succeeded by many blows from other rebels. The army under the instruction of Captain Arjan Singh, surrounded the Pakud tree where Chadak festival was going on. The first order to the army was ‘close the approach to the canal’ (P. 126). At the dead of night few people were wandering near the canal and they were shot dead by the army. Immediately there erupted a violent fight between the army with their upgraded weapons and the local with their traditional ones. In that fight 41 tribals got brutally killed. Mysteriously one of the corpses rose up and by his two hands wrung up the neck of the air. He shouted, ‘I’m Bashai Tudu. Come on , fight, if there’s any among you with guts enough. Fight’ (P. 126). He was tied very

tightly to one of the roots of the Pakud tree and torrent of bullets from Arjan Singh penetrated Bashai's weak body suffering from the lack of protein. Rtoni Sau, Surja Sau's brother, pointed out that out of 41 dead bodies two were missing – Dopdi Mejhen and Dulna Majhi. There were no signs of them. When Kali Santra reached Surja Sau's house he was asked to identify Bashai. When examining closely Kali felt that Mushai adopted the role of Bashai, but kept it a secret to his heart. He told SP that the dead body resembled Bashai. The corpse's face was also smashed in that case and only the mannerism remained the same – wringing the neck of air.

In 1974 wages for agricultural labourers were revised. Men and women were entitled to get equal rate—five rupees and sixty paisa per day. Child labourers were approved to get rupees four a day. It was simply pathetic to learn that the Government approved rate was not in practice in the year 1976. To facilitate the implementation of the rate sixteen inspectors who remained confined to Kolkata Office, were appointed for 3.7 million agricultural labourers. As an inevitable result, they remained unjustly deprived. One early morning a constable reached at Kali's place and told him to get on the jeep. Kali was informed that 'BashaiTudu is alive. Come along with us and help us'(P. 146). The operation took place at Kadamkhuinya, a god-forsaken place. The local MLA's father Jagattaranbabu, the biggest money-lender and the biggest Jotedar having sixteen acres of land to feed the family, continued to appoint bonded labourers for cultivation. The history of slavery passed on from one generation to another. Jagattaran put the rebels' houses on fire. Then the action started between Bashai on the one hand and the police and Jagattaran's retainers on the other. Bashai was critically injured. When Kali met Bashai he saw 'Bashai sat leaning against a tree, his left leg grotesquely bloated, purple, his abdomen swollen, his left leg stretched out an unnatural angle(P. 157). Bashai was suffering from gangrene, and slowly succumbed to death. In an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, She says, 'I led a procession through

the streets of Palamu, we went to the District Commissioner. The women led the procession, shouting slogans: 'Bonded System Must End', 'The Land Belongs to the Tiller, Not the Absentee Landlord,' and many others' (Imaginary Maps, v).

Government approved minimum wage was never accepted by the Jotedars and the money-lenders because they considered themselves as the pillars of the state. The administration also did not intervene because 3.7 million people were 'expendable'. Bashai had to receive his fifth death after killing Haridhan Sardar of Piyasole. But this time administration did not seek Kali's help to identify Bashai. Kali felt, 'As expected. In his fifth death Bashai was dead and buried. In the night. The same night that he fled from his den. The sixth time...the seventh...the eighth...There's nothing called death, comrade' (171). We cannot but remember what Betul told Kali Santra, 'He's not a man. Can a man die four times, and come alive every time? Every time they say that Bashai's dead, they all identify the dead body, and the pulooce burn the body up, and then Bashai comes back to fight again' (P. 22). Bashai is not the name of a person, it is identified with a burning revolution, it has become a myth that whenever there is exploitation, oppression, tyranny, Bashai will come back to life again and again to fight for justice. In the preface to the novella, Mahasweta Debi writes, 'I still believe in men, not in records on paper..... That is where I stand apart from the politics of the Left, and makes him more so today than ever' (P. xxv).

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